

DE and Rostow group
10-26-11

I was assigned to two of the three working groups working under the ExComm. One, on which Harry Rowen was working (he may have been the head of it) was coordinating plans for an air attack and invasion of Cuba, a few days away: Monday or Tuesday, October 29 or 30. The other, under Walt Rostow, was "long range planning," looking two weeks ahead.

That sounds funny; the truth was, two weeks ahead generally passed for "long range planning" in the Pentagon, not just during a crisis. Actually, as I was to learn two years later, when I worked there full time, nearly everything in the E ring of the Pentagon had the feel of a crisis, an intense effort with a short deadline: an upcoming presidential or secdef speech, secdef testimony to Congress, the deadline for a report or a budget, instructions that had to be cabled out to embassies or theater commanders.

Usually several of these were going on at the same time, involving some of the same people. The difference that the existence of a "super"-crisis made was that *other* "long range" concerns faded into the background, so that we were all focusing on just this one problem at the same time. There was almost a relaxing aspect to that, despite the hours (which weren't all that different from the all-nighters that the normal crises demanded).

On Wednesday, October 24, as the ExComm was waiting tensely for word of the response of Soviet shipping to the onset of the blockade, the staffs of the working groups were gathered in one room in State, around a very long table. Couriers were bringing cables in from all over the world, reporting on the mood in various countries. As the later Sixties slogan had it, the whole world was watching: and expressing concern in various ways about their prospects for survival at the hands of the superpowers.

I was very struck at one point by the juxtaposition of two cables, one reporting youthful protests in front of the American Embassy in Bonn and another, a mass march of students in India. Tom Schelling, who had prepared and directed the Berlin political game almost exactly a year before, had fed the players reports of events almost identical to these two in the course of the play.

As Walt Rostow passed behind my chair, I grabbed his elbow and thrust the cables up for him to look at. As he was reading, I said, "Walt, this shows how realistic that Berlin game was."

He handed the papers back to me and said, "Or how unrealistic this is."

Good line, I thought. But the next day I was less impressed by the course of his thinking. He took me with him to interview a CIA specialist, over at a Pentagon office, on the options for bringing pressure on the Soviets to remove the missiles without an attack. He particularly wanted to hear how effective an expanded blockade might be, above all an embargo on oil. The specialist said that Cuba did indeed depend entirely on imported oil,

and that a cutoff would lead eventually to a breakdown of their economy as stores were exhausted.

He asked how long that would take. About thirty days, the specialist said, as I remember. Rostow was very taken by that, unduly I thought. He said with some excitement, "It would be a clock, ticking!"

I was thinking about the rushed effort in the other group and in the JCS to launch an air attack on Monday, before all the missiles became fully operational. I said that it didn't seem very relevant to me to pin hopes in the current situation on a clock whose alarm wouldn't go off for thirty days.

Later I learned that Walt's enthusiasm for the oil blockade had reflected a long-term focus of his originating in World War II. As an adviser on targeting for strategic bombing in London, he had become convinced that a concentration on bombing oil targets would have shortened the war. In postwar interviews, Albert Speer, who had been in charge of the German economy, had reinforced this belief.

Later, as National Security Assistant, Rostow was to push very hard in 1966 for a heavy attack on oil facilities in North Vietnam, as a war-winner. (It turned out to have little effect because the Vietnamese by that time had dispersed their oil storage widely.) What I was encountering in 1962, puzzling me then about the allure of a thirty-day project, was Walt's lifelong ambition to cut off the vital fluids of an adversary.

Well, what else did we have? The CIA expert listed a menu of covert operations. Various forms and targets of sabotage. Introducing algae into oil storage tanks that would clog all the pipes. Causing crops to fail by dropping parasites and forms of wheat rust—a kind of biological warfare--and others methods to lower the efficiency of the economy.

I didn't know—until I read reports of the Church Committee in 1975-76-- that all of these were already being attempted in 1962 in a large covert program called Operation Mongoose that was under the control of my later boss in Vietnam, Gen. Edward G. Lansdale. Unknown to me (and possibly to Rostow) there was a team of saboteurs in Cuba as we spoke.

But somewhat surprisingly this agenda was familiar to me. I had heard all these "dirty tricks" described the year before, in the spring of 1961, at a temporary building in DC that served the CIA. A CIA chemist in the technical services branch of the clandestine services, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, had briefed a select group of us from the RAND corporation on CIA ongoing efforts aimed at causing unrest and resistance in the Castro regime. The idea was possibly to enlist RAND in giving technical R&D advice to these efforts.

They included, alongside the economic warfare described above, clandestine devices that seemed closer to the practical jokes sold in low-grade novelty stores than to the exotic

technical offerings in the James Bond movies that were just beginning to appear. One was a “who, me?” device for squirting a foul odor on the uniform of a passing Cuban military officer that would lead his fellows to suspect he had dirtied his pants. Another was a project for humiliating Castro by putting thallium in his shoes to cause his beard to fall out, and spraying his TV studio with LSD.

(Nothing was said, as I remember, about schemes for assassinating Castro, which had been going on for a year. Gottlieb’s contributions to these, according to the Church Report, included proposals to give him a poisoned wetsuit, or getting him to swim by an explosive conch shell, and giving him a poisoned cigar or a poisonous ballpoint pen. In 1960, the year before our briefing, Dr. Gottlieb had transported poison to the Congo for an attempt to assassinate President Patrice Lumumba.)

I had listened to this recital in 1961 with growing anger. Most of it sounded like kid stuff, absurd: and the more serious parts, both aggressive and pointless. I finally burst out, in an unwontedly acid tone, “All of this is *good fun*. But just what is it supposed to accomplish? It sounds like a program that only makes life more miserable for people in a poor country.”

I suspected my colleagues were feeling uncomfortable with my brash challenge to the first direct representative of the CIA Directorate of Operations we had ever met, who was introducing us for the first time to the arcane world of covert operations. But the briefer said, very mildly, “That’s a very good question! We’ve had some serious internal discussions about that.”

He didn’t answer it. But as our group was leaving, shortly after, Gottlieb took me aside and said, “You asked some very penetrating questions in there. There are some people at the Agency who would be very interested in pursuing that with you. Would you be willing to do that?” My questions had seemed pretty elementary to me, but of course I said that I would. I never heard more from him, though.

(Interestingly, the Church Committee in 1975 revealed that in the summer of 1971 he advised Gordon Liddy on how to administer LSD to the wheel of Jack Anderson’s car in hopes of causing him to go off the road on his commute to DC. A Liddy plan to have LSD put into my soup at a dinner ceremony of the Federal Employees for Peace that fall—to cause me to disgrace myself as I was accepting an award as “Federal Employee of the Year”—came out of that same discussion. According to Liddy, this proposal was approved by the White House too late for the Cuban waiter to carry out the plan. Reading this in Liddy’s memoir, I wondered whether his advisor Gottlieb ever recalled my name from our earlier encounter.)

Hearing it all again during the Missile Crisis—minus the stink devices and depilatories—didn’t impress me any more than it had the year before. We thanked the man from CIA and went back to the Situation Room at State, though Walt still seemed so taken with the thirty-day ticking clock on oil that I wrote a memo to him that afternoon to repeat my skepticism.

What was going to work faster? Our threats, I thought, and our obvious preparations to carry them out. No bargain seemed necessary. At one point, I think on Friday, in the working group on “short-range planning”—for the air strike and invasion starting Monday or Tuesday—Douglas Dillon, the secretary of the treasury, raised the issue of what we were prepared to offer to allow Khrushchev to save face. (I don’t recall why he was present in this working-level discussion; it was the only time during the crisis I was face-to-face with a cabinet-level member of the ExComm.)

This memory is somewhat paradoxical. I didn’t know it then, but Dillon had favored an air strike initially over the blockade, and was counted throughout the crisis as a hawk. In interviews decades later, he was critical of JFK’s cautiousness in the crisis, especially when he learned of the secret deal on Turkey. Yet at this moment, looking at me directly he said, “We’ve got to give him something. What are we offering him?”

I stared him in the eye and said, “We offering not to blow up his goddamn missiles!” The treasury secretary looked at me incredulously, snorted, and turned away. Not my proudest memory, though it was what I felt at the time.